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AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
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SUBJECT: SYRIA AND TERRORISM

11. SECRET - ENTIRE TEXT.

12. SUMMARY: SYRIA CONSIDERS ITSELF A TRUE CONFRONTATION STATE--EVERYTHING THAT CONTRIBUTES TO DEFEATING THE ENEMY IS POSITIVE. THE "STRUGGLE" PROVIDES A GUIDE FOR CHOOSING THE TARGET AND LEGITIMIZES THE MEANS, INCLUDING TERRORISM, WHICH IS VIEWED AS COST-EFFECTIVE. SYRIA IS HOST TO PLENTY OF WILLING HELPERS, PRIMARILY LARGE NUMBERS OF DISAFFECTED AND RADICALIZED PALESTINIANS, BUT ALSO KURDS AND ARMENIANS. AS LONG AS COMMON FOES ARE TARGETED, SYRIA TOLERATES TERRORIST ACTIONS BY OTHERS. RETALIATION AGAINST SYRIA WOULD HAVE PROBLEMATIC EFFECTS, AND PROBABLY WOULD NOT DETER FUTURE TERRORISM. END SUMMARY.

13. SYRIA HAS A RECORD OF SPONSORSHIP OF TERRORISM AND A HISTORY OF HARBORING GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO ENGAGE IN TERRORIST ACTS. SYRIA HAS ALSO BEEN A VICTIM OF A SUBSTANTIAL NUMBER OF TERRORIST ACTIONS. SYRIA CONSIDERS ITSELF A CONFRONTATION STATE IN THE PURE SENSE--IT IS AT WAR WITH ISRAEL AND EVERYTHING THAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE EFFORT TO DEFEAT THE ENEMY IS POSITIVE. SPECIFIC TERRORIST OPERATIONS WILL B MOUNTED OR NOT, ACCORDING TO THIS CRITERION.

14. OTHER ARAB STATES WHOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH ISRAEL IS NOT JURIDICALLY ONE OF PEACE DO NOT CONDONE OR PROMOTE TERRORISM. IN THIS MESSAGE WE EXAMINE SOME ASPECTS OF SYRIA THAT MAKE IT DIFFERENT.

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WHAT MAKES SYRIA DIFFERENT?  
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15. THE BA'THI, MINORITY GOVERNMENT OF HAFIZ AL-ASAD IS BUILT UPON AN IDEOLOGY THAT INCREASINGLY HAS COME TO FOCUS ON THE ISSUE OF SYRIA'S ROLE IN CONFRONTING THE "ZIONIST ENEMY," ISRAEL. SYRIA PERCEIVES THAT IT STANDS ALONE AMONG THE STATES NEIGHBORING ISRAEL IN PROMOTING "REAL" CONFRONTATION, SINCE JORDAN AND EGYPT HAVE FALLEN FROM GRACE INTO "CAPITULATIONISM," LEBANON HAS TURNED INWARD, AND IRAQ HAS SHIFTED TOWARDS THE ARAB RIGHT. SYRIA'S REGIONAL ISOLATION--AS A RADICAL STATE WITH TIES TO IRAN AND LIBYA--ALSO CONTRIBUTES TO THE STRONG SENSE OF UNIQUENESS FELT BY THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP. GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY ARE ADDITIONAL FACTORS: SYRIA IS STRATEGICALLY PLACED ON THE CROSSROADS OF THE

LEVANT WITH ACCESS TO AND VULNERABILITY FROM MANY COUNTRIES IN THE REGION. DEMOGRAPHICALLY, SYRIA'S POPULATION IS HETEROGENOUS, INCLUDING, FOR EXAMPLE, SUBSTANTIAL NUMBERS OF PALESTINIANS, KURDS, AND ARMENIANS. THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN SYRIA WHO HAVE GRIEVANCES AGAINST SOMEBODY ELSE, SOMEWHERE ELSE.

¶6. WHAT REALLY DISTINGUISHES SYRIA, HOWEVER, IS ITS CANDID ASSESSMENT THAT TERRORISM IS COST EFFECTIVE. IN PART, THIS IS A FUNCTION OF THE DETERRENTS TO ANY DIRECT MILITARY ACTION POSED BY SUPERIOR ISRAELI FORCES OR ARAB OPINION. SYRIA IS ALSO NOT THE FIRST REGIME TO HAVE DISCOVERED THAT ONE EFFECTIVE WAY OF DEALING WITH POLITICAL OPPOSITION IS TO EXTINGUISH IT. ANOTHER FACTOR WHICH WE CANNOT ASSESS PRECISELY IS THE EXTENT AND NATURE OF SOVIET SUPPORT FOR TERRORIST ACTIVITIES WHICH MAY BE DIRECTED FROM SYRIA. FOR EXAMPLE, IT IS NOT FAR FETCHED TO CONCEIVE OF A SOVIET ROLE IN PROMOTING INSURGENT ACTIVITIES INVOLVING THE KURDS AGAINST TURKEY OR TERRORIST ACTIVITIES INVOLVING OTHER GROUPS AGAINST EUROPEAN TARGETS. (THE SOVIETS HERE STOUTLY MAINTAIN THEIR OPPOSITION TO, AND NON-INVOLVEMENT IN, ANY SUCH ACTIVITIES.)

¶7. SYRIA DOES NOT LABEL THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE ISRAELI ENEMY AS "TERRORISM." INDEED, IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO DISCUSS WITH MOST AVERAGE SYRIANS THE ISSUE OF TERRORISM AGAINST ISRAEL; IT IS CONSIDERED AN OXYMORON, I.E., IF AMERICANS FOUGHT TO LIBERATE THEIR LAND FROM BRITISH OCCUPIERS, THEN LEBANESE AND PALESTINIANS ARE ALSO FREEDOM FIGHTERS, NOT TERRORISTS. MOREOVER, SYRIA DEFINES THE "NATIONAL RESISTANCE" BROADLY, SO THAT MODERATE ARABS BECOME LEGITIMATE TARGETS. BUT THE OBJECTIVES ARE ALWAYS THE SAME--UNTIL SUCH TIME AS THE ARABS ARE UNITED AND STRONG, SYRIA MUST WEAKEN THE ENEMY, DISCOURAGE INDEPENDENT ARAB INITIATIVES, AND BLOCK A MODERATE CONSENSUS.

¶8. THE TOOLS ARE AVAILABLE. FOR EXAMPLE, THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF DISAFFECTED, RADICAL PALESTINIANS WHO ARE PREPARED TO ACT NOT ONLY AGAINST THE ISRAELIS BUT, MORE IMPORTANTLY, AGAINST THE JORDANIANS AND MODERATE PALESTINIANS. THERE ARE WILLING RECRUITS HERE AND ELSEWHERE FOR MANY OF THE ACTIONS WHICH COMMONLY ARE LABELED SYRIAN-SPONSORED BUT WHICH IN FACT ARE CONDUCTED WITHOUT EXPLICIT SYRIAN APPROVAL. SINCE SYRIA DOES NOT GENERALLY OBJECT TO TARGETTING A COMMON FOE, IT MIGHT, THEREFORE, BE MORE APPROPRIATE TO CALL THESE TERRORIST ACTIONS SYRIAN-TOLERATED.

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TARGETS  
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¶9. ALMOST ANY TARGET IS "LEGITIMATE." HOWEVER, THE PROBABILITY OF A TERRORIST ACT, AS WELL AS ITS LINKAGE TO SYRIA, RISES WITH THE DEGREE OF THE TARGET'S ASSOCIATION WITH ISRAEL OR A PEACE PROCESS THAT DOES NOT HAVE SYRIAN APPROVAL. THUS, SYRIA PROBABLY AT WORST TOLERATES AND AT BEST IS NOT ABLE TO CONTROL TERRORISM SUCH AS THAT BY ARMENIANS OR KURDS AGAINST TURKS. ON THE OTHER HAND, IT COOPERATES ACTIVELY IN TERRORISM DIRECTED AGAINST JORDAN, WHEN THE PEACE PROCESS SHOWS LIFE. SOMETIMES SYRIA'S HAND IS QUITE DIRECT, AS IN THE CASES OF ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATIONS OF MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD FIGURES ABROAD AND IN ATTACKS AGAINST IRAQI CITIZENS AND FACILITIES. MORE OFTEN, "FRIENDS" DO THE DIRTY WORK. THUS, THE CRAZY-QUILT OF PALESTINIAN GROUPS IN DAMASCUS ALL OCCASIONALLY GET THEIR CHANCE AT THE JORDANIANS, FATAH, OR THE ISRAELIS.

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RETALIATION  
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¶10. SINCE THE IDEA OF RETALIATION FOR A TERRORIST ACT HAS OCCURRED TO ALL AT SOME POINT, IT IS WORTH CONSIDERING IN THE CASE OF SYRIA. OBVIOUSLY, THE GREATEST DIFFICULTY IS IN ESTABLISHING SYRIAN COMPLICITY. THAT

ASIDE, RETALIATION WOULD MEET HERE WITH A CONTRADICTORY RANGE OF EMOTIONS: IT WOULD BE UNDERSTOOD IN TYPICALLY MIDDLE EAST FASHION, BUT IT WOULD NOT DETER, BECAUSE FOR THOSE WHO WOULD UNDERTAKE TERRORIST ACTIONS THE CAUSE AND THEIR DEDICATION TO IT ARE PARAMOUNT. MORE-OVER, FAILURE OF A RETALIATORY ACTION COULD BE DISASTROUS. U.S. POLICY WOULD HAVE TO BE PERCEIVED TO BE DIRECT, ACCURATE, AND EFFECTIVE. (THE IMAGE OF U.S. ABILITY TO RESPOND IS THREATENED BY OUR PRESUMED ASSOCIATION WITH EVENTS SUCH AS THE BIR AL-ABID CAR BOMBING IN WEST BEIRUT, NOT TO MENTION THE DECEMBER 1983 AIR STRIKE IN THE BIQA' WHICH RESULTED IN CAPTURE OF A U.S. FLYER.) FINALLY, RETALIATION IS A FAVORITE ISRAELI POLICY WHICH MOST TERRORIST ANALYSTS ACKNOWLEDGE HAS NEVER WORKED. THE U.S. COULD END UP ADDING TO THE PROBLEM BY FURTHER ALIENATING ARAB OPINION.

¶11. WE HAVE NOT TOUCHED UPON THE QUESTION OF PREEMPTION BECAUSE IN OUR VIEW, GIVEN SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE, PREEMPTION WOULD SEEM TO BE LOGICAL AND NECESSARY IF IT IS POSSIBLE.

¶12. FINALLY, IRANIAN- AND LIBYAN-SPONSORED TERRORISM, WHICH TAINTS SYRIA BY ASSOCIATION, IS NOT NECESSARILY APPROVED OR EVEN CONDONED BY SYRIA. A GOOD EXAMPLE IS HOSTAGE-TAKING IN LEBANON. THERE IS LITTLE SYRIA CAN DO TO PREVENT SUCH ACTIONS WITHOUT PAYING A HIGH PRICE IN OTHER NATIONAL INTERESTS. SYRIA COULD DO MUCH MORE, WE BELIEVE, TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM OF HOSTAGES AFTER THEY ARE TAKEN, BUT PREVENTION OF INDIVIDUAL TERRORIST ACTS SUCH AS THOSE OCCURRING NOW IN BEIRUT, IS PROBABLY NOT POSSIBLE FOR SYRIA.

¶13. BEIRUT MINIMIZE CONSIDERED.

GLASPIE